

Seymour sends a double message

My name is Tobi Delbruck and I am the third child of Manny and Max Delbruck. I will tell a few stories of my interactions with Seymour, which are imprinted on me despite being quite sparse.

I've known the Benzers as family friends since I was a young child. Manny and Max knew the Benzers since at least the 1950s and all the Delbruck children (Jonathan, Niki, Tobi and Ludina) also knew the Benzer family, particularly Jonathan and Niki. Jonathan in particular has some very good stories to tell about Barbie Benzer and their adventure to Haight Ashbury in San Francisco during the Summer of Love 1969, an adventure including a large bag of vitamin pills mistaken for powerful hallucinogens and a Packard automobile broken down by a oil-starved burned out main bearing around San Bernardino. But my two stories occur in the years around 1966 and around 1986, twenty years apart.

During the 1960s, Manny would sometimes go traveling. Max could cook a few simple dishes, but almost invariably when Manny was off somewhere, Max took the opportunity of inviting himself, along with Ludina and Tobi, over to the Benzer's apartment on Del Mar for dinner. Dotty and Seymour by then were living by themselves in an apartment rather than a house. Perhaps that made them feel more like the New York Benzers. Their Del Mar apartment was a spacious and comfortable place and Dotty would cook something tasty. 6 year olds rarely remember what they ate (even the same day, based on my own experiences with our daughter Dee-Dee).



On March 1, 1978 Dotty Benzer died.
Among her last words were, "Life is good."

Try to live a little extra for her.

We are assembling a Dotty scrapbook. If you
have snapshots, anecdotes, or some words
to contribute, do send them.

Seymour Benzer
Division of Biology
California Institute of Technology
Pasadena, California 91125

Marty Benzer
8200 Wisconsin Avenue, Apt. 1508
Bethesda, Maryland 20014

Barbie, Bob, and Bernie Freidin
36 Rowe St.
Auburndale, Massachusetts 02166

Photo of Dotty Benzer, hanging on Manny Delbruck's memorial wall at the Delbruck house in Pasadena.

But I remember two things: First was the pachinko machine sitting in the corner of their living room. A pachinko machine is like open-loop vertical pinball. You pull a little lever and a little 1 cm steel ball gets shot up to the top of the game and then dribbles down through a forest of metal studs. The object is to get the ball into one of the holes. Ludina and I would drive the adults crazy playing this stupid machine. Why do I remember this? Because I'm writing this story on a train from Tokyo to Kyoto and last night I passed many pachinko parlors. I don't know how this machine came to the Benzers and I don't know what happened to it since, but if I could have one too I would, just for the pleasure it would give to all kids who come to visit.

The other memory of the 1960s was Dotty Benzer. I loved her like only a grandchild can love a doting grandmother. Her bustling cheerfulness is imprinted on my earliest memories as strongly as Manny's. Her picture still stands on Manny's "memorial" wall next to the study at 1510 Oakdale Street.

Now we come to Pasadena, ca. 1986: Max died in 1981 and I squeaked into Caltech. I became a grad student transferred to the newly formed CNS program after a rocky start in physics. It was the night of the annual Prufrock House Halloween party on Holliston Avenue. Ed Lewis was there, as usual with the most imaginative costume, wearing a rectangular fish tank covering his head with live fish swimming in the front. Poor Tobi doesn't know Ed Lewis (only reading about him in Jonathan Weiner's amazing *Time, Love and Memory* in 2007), and in drunken exuberance makes faces at the fish in Lewis tank. That night I wore a costume consisting of an electrified jump suit embedded with flashing LEDs, an outfit built by and borrowed from the young professor Christoph Koch, newly hired to lead the forward charge of the CNS program. After hours of dancing, drinking and leering at Marcus Meister's edible new Italian girlfriend, the Pasadena police arrived to shut down the party. Tobi is outraged (not yet but soon to learn the folly of any argument with the police, anywhere). He asks the officer, "Why can't we just go inside and turn down the music?"

The officer, ready to go back to the station and get over with his shift in comfort, repeated, "Everybody go home, just go home now".

In my drunken confusion, this statement failed to answer his question, Again I asked, "Why can't we just go inside and turn down the music?".

The officer said, perceiving that either things were going to go out of control or that this was the best way to get back to the station, "Go home now! One more word out of you and you're going to jail."

But again this fails to answer the seemingly reasonable question and once more out of my mouth comes: "Why can't we just ...". At that the officer grabs me, puts in in an armlock, and marches him straight to the back seat of the car, and then proceeds in satisfaction to drive Tobi to the station for a night of paperwork.

This was only the start of things. Having someone thrown in jail is sufficiently unusual at Caltech parties that it started a furious statement-writing session. By morning several handwritten statements had been delivered to 1510 Oakdale Street (where Tobi's was at that time living with

Manny, being between girlfriends). But during the middle of the night there were many more phone calls to 1510 Oakdale, the first one having woken up Manny at about 1am. Her first thought was, "Oh no, Tobi crashed his motorcycle!" This was followed by relief, "Oh, he's only in jail, thank god!"

At that time Mani Ramaswami, a Indian student of Mark Tanoyue, working on synapse formation, was living with us at 1510 Oakdale Street in the back garden workshop room. He had retired earlier from the party. During the night, he kept being woken by his broken alarm clock, which when he hit it several times, would stop ringing and let him go back to sleep. At breakfast early the next morning (I by that time sitting in some misery in a small metal holding cell), Mani finally realized that the broken alarm clock was in fact the remote unit of the wireless house telephone. Every time someone would call Manny to report progress at the Pasadena police station, what bail was needed, who would do what, and so forth, the phone would ring, waking Mani up. After a few rings Manny would answer the phone and Mani could go back to sleep, satisfied he has chastised his recalcitrant alarm clock.

(to be added later)

Tobi wearing his jail outfit, Pasadena, 1986

It happened that Venky Venkatesh was visiting at that time. Venky, a former student of Mark Tanoyue's, was going through tenure woes in Oregon. He joined Manny and Mani to bail Tobi out of jail. Tobi emerged in the alley behind the station, wearing a white paper jail outfit, Christoph's electric jumpsuit having been confiscated in fears by the police that it could be used perhaps for escape or suicide. A visible gleam of joy appeared on Venky's face at seeing Tobi in such a state, even worse than his own worries about tenure.

Seymour apparently had his ears to the ground. A week or so later, the Delbruck's had a backyard barbeque party. Seymour came (as always enjoying any kind of party), and he brought along his 5 year old Alex.

At one point, a somewhat chagrined Tobi was standing in the back with a few people, including Seymour and Manny, and Seymour took Alex's arm and said to him, "Alex, do you see that man?" pointing at me.

Alex nodded, and then Seymour, looking at both of us in turn with a slight smile on his face, said to Alex "Alex, that man has been in jail." Alex looked at Tobi in solemn wonder.

I was just watching a few minutes ago here in a hotel in Osaka the videos of the Max Delbruck Centennial celebration in 2006 held at Caltech. Rob Phillips gave a good talk about his early influences from Max and others, and Seymour gave a talk about Manny and Max, so carefully prepared, so beautifully arranged with photos and film of the years Max and Manny, Seymour and Dotty, the Hodge family, and camping in the desert, presented in his deadpan finest form.

Seymour lives in my memory like only a few others in my life. I hope I can pass on his attitude to my own future. I have attached a couple of recent photos taken during 2007, one on a Benzer DimSum expedition one Sunday in Spring, and another at a recent Delbruck afternoon party on the occasion of the quarter sabbatical that Shih-Chii Liu, Dee-Dee and I spent at Caltech.



Dim-Sum with the Benzners, January 2007, Alhambra. From left, Ludina Delbruck Sallam, ? Alex, Rennie, Seymour Benzer, Shih-Chii Liu.



Delbruck house, 1510 Oakdale Street, Pasadena, March or April 2007. Shih-Chii Liu and Seymour Benzer.

[Tobi Delbruck](#), [Inst. for Neuroinformatics](#), UZH-ETH Zurich